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So What?
Reflections on the Study of Information Society

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This chapter was first supposed to be an epilogue, highlighting the central points of the bulky text. But then I realised that if the reader has ploughed through the 10 chapters, he or she no longer needs tutoring about what to make of it all – a reader surviving this far is no doubt mature enough to conclude for himself/herself, what the meaning of "information society" or "informational societies", in short IS, really is.

Nevertheless, I invite the reader to ask So What? And to answer by focusing on what all this suggests about how to *study* the phenomena of IS. In other words, we should now shift the perspective from the phenomena themselves to the ways in which they are articulated in academic disciplines – from the "real world" to the paradigms and research traditions about the world. Such a meta-perspective in fact suggests that we revert to the first chapter, where Antti Kasvio guided us through the main traditions of academic thinking about IS, and indeed to the Preface, where Erkki Karvonen reminded us about the great stories of historical revolutions, the latest of which is crucially made by information.

However, this epilogue is no place to continue discussing the merits of various research traditions. I shall simply offer some ideas for conducting and organising academic studies so that the challenge raised by the preceding chapters will be adequately met in universities – both in our Finnish reality (and in similar western European

conditions), and in the Hungarian reality (and in similar Central/East European conditions). My reflections are presented from two angles to the contemporary academic institutions: Why is IS worth studying? How should studies of IS be organised?

The reasons for studying IS can be listed under four headings: 1) history, 2) economy, 3) information, 4) society. In short, my thesis is that, especially in contemporary journalism and media studies, IS can save society from falling between the fashionable chairs of culture and technology.

The ways to study IS, on the other hand, can be summarised by 1) placing emphasis on sociology and political economy, i.e. on macro paradigms instead of countless micro perspectives, and by 2) ensuring that the studies are conducted from a broad interdisciplinary platform, while on the other hand not creating an intellectual goulash.

WHY TO STUDY IS?

"One cannot eat information" is a standard argument against those who have made IS into hype. Indeed, even the most advanced post-industrial societies remain dependent on a lot of physical labour, and dreams such as telework reducing traffic and electronic management eliminating paper are far from materialising. The car and paper industries have not collapsed; on the contrary, traffic and pollution problems are getting worse. Although the European Union is advocating eEurope as a regional policy towards IS, and local initiatives such as eTampere follow suit, it is important to be realistic about the socio-economic developments, as highlighted by the chapter of Raimo Blom, Harri Melin and Peter Robert.

Accordingly, one should be careful not to mystify IS and turn it into an ideology, as is the tendency in national IS programmes exemplified by the Finnish case in Jari Aro's chapter. On the other hand, we should not become hyper-critical, either, and deny the significant new aspects associated with IS. This topic simply cannot be overlooked in contemporary social science. In this sense an answer to the above question is self-evident: IS should be studied because it represents something that is vital in social development.

But my point goes beyond the merits of the IS developments themselves. I find IS quite useful, particularly in studies of journalism and

mass communication, since it provides such intellectual material that invites, indeed compells, a proper *context for understanding the media*. The same could obviously be said from the point of view of other social sciences, but my arguments here are based on media studies.

History

First of all, IS suggests a broad outline of history – with waves and revolutions, as noted in the editor's Preface. My own introductory course on communication has started since the early 1970s with a perspective of communication "revolutions" (speech, writing, printing, electronic) related to the fundamental socio-economic modes of development (hunting-gathering, agriculture, trade, industry) and to the respective socio-political systems (tribal, feudal, capitalist, socialist, democratic). In such a perspective IS has a natural and strategic place, showing how all societies at all times have been to a degree informational societies and how this aspect has lately grown in importance.[1]

Consequently, this perspective helps to create and maintain a historical frame of reference. History is all too easily overlooked in media studies, which are typically dominated by the juicy elements of the day – including media spectacles and new technologies understood as part and parcel of IS itself. So I admit that IS has also nurtured an unhealthy tendency towards a superficial notion of communication as something a-historical. Armand Mattelart even suggests in his recent book[2] that IS and communication has replaced development as the paradigm of endless progress, which in fact prevents us from seeing history beyond the past decade or two, thus leading us to a mental "short circuit". Yet, I am convinced that IS also feeds a healthy tendency to highlight rather than cover up history.

Economy

Secondly, IS suggests an economic perspective. This includes the customary breakdown of labour force into different types, with informa-

1. This paradigm was elaborated in my introductory textbook on journalism and mass communication, with a section on "Information explosion", published in Finnish in 1975 (*Tiedotusoppi*) and transtlated into Swedish, Danish and Hungarian in 1977.

2. *Histoire de la société de l'information*. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2001.

tion processing as a growing sector in the occupational structure. But information economy is much more, as Pál Tamás points out in his chapter; it takes us back to the fundamentals of social relations – literally to the radical tradition in social sciences, including the classics of Karl Marx et al. It was no coincidence that the OECD was among the first to respond to the challenge of IS, known in the 1970s as "computer-telecommunication policy". It is also symptomatic that IS issues in the EU belong to a commissioner (Martin Bangemann, followed by Erkki Liikanen) whose prime mandate is in trade and industry.

An economic perspective – both macro and micro – on IS enjoys such wide support that there is no risk of economy being forgotten. Rather there is a risk that the IS discourse invites "soft" culture to be offset by "hard" economy. But considering again media studies in general, it is obvious that economic aspects are overlooked and therefore IS serves as a welcome corrective measure. In fact, a cultural studies orientation in approaching the media has created such a heavy emphasis on the symbolic level of media discourse that the material level of media structure has been neglected. It is in this sense that I welcome IS as a balancing factor in the paradigmatic struggle – to ensure that political economy is not replaced by cultural studies.

Information

The nature of information and communication is not one of the strongest parts of media research tradition. Actually it is a paradox and anomaly that a discipline has pretty much bypassed the core of the life phenomenon which it is supposed to examine. Likewise, the scientific and administrative approaches to IS lack crystal clear definitions about what information is. There persists widespread confusion between more or less technical information and human knowledge, especially in languages such as Finnish, where the word for intelligent knowledge ("tieto") has been adopted to refer to all kinds of information, including computers ("tietokone", literally "knowledge machine").

The confusion is so common, and the homework of media studies so poorly done, that it is naturally exposed by IS. Therefore IS does good for media studies – not directly by offering conceptual clarity but indirectly by compelling the discipline to theorise about its core concepts. Karvonen's chapter reminds us all about his challenge.

Society

Like information, society tends to be lost in media studies. This is especially true under the influence of cultural studies, which tend to reduce society into a thin web of power relations. Similarly, technology tends to distract attention from social relations and structures. Here IS by its very nature serves as a corrective measure – as in the case of economy. Society with its macro perspective is such an essential part of the IS idea that it cannot be missed even by cultural and technological enthusiasts.

It goes without saying that there are different concepts and schools of thought about the nature of society, and I do not suggest that IS helps to solve this paradigmatic problem. However, it is already important that society is compelled to occupy a prominent place in the agenda of research and study. Ironically this has to be stated not only regarding media studies being pursued within the humanities but also within the social sciences.

The whole field of social science today is in a problematic – some would call it crazy – state of affairs, not least because of the increasingly blurred boundaries with other fields of science. In this respect, too, IS serves as a healthy catalyst for deconstructing the system of sciences. Likewise, IS helps to avoid a separation of theory and practice – to bring analytical reasoning and policy considerations to a common intellectual platform.

HOW TO STUDY IS?

The first answer to this question is to set priorities regarding the disciplines being studied: to ensure that society is not lost between various exciting and fashionable elements such as new technologies, top priority should be given to sociology. IS cannot be understood without at least the fundamentals of general social science, in particular what is known as macro-sociology and political economy.

This does not mean in practice that everyone must become students of sociology. A rudimentary understanding can be achieved even by one course, if it is built so as to cover both the philosophical traditions of the past and the theoretical streams of the present, supported by an appropriate textbook.[3]

3. A comprehensive reader on social theories of the present is *Understanding Contemporary Society*, edited by Gary Browning, Abigail Halcli and Frank Webster (London: SAGE, 2000).

Second to such a basic knowledge of sociology comes a course on the "classics" in IS. In practice, this would be made up of readings of those scholars and works listed in Kasvio's introductory chapter – from Karl Marx and Max Weber to Anthony Giddens and Manuel Castells.[4]

Such a dose of basics helps the student to acquire a broad frame of reference – to appreciate IS primarily in a macro perspective, without being led astray by various micro approaches. The curriculum aims at inspiring the student to construct a holistic picture of IS – to reach beyond a postmodernist solution of fragmented landscape towards a great narrative.

However, a preference for a macro perspective and a big story does not mean to feed the student with a uniform ideology. On the contrary, a vital part of the pedagogy should be to engender critical thinking about IS – a kind of sensitivity training on how to avoid being indoctrinated by political and technological forces.

Finally, the study of IS should be organised in a truly interdisciplinary way instead of being made into the bastion of a single school of thought. On the other hand, like any interdisciplinary project, this open platform should avoid going to the other extreme and becoming so eclectic that depth is sacrified to breadth.

4. The Tempus project and the present textbook inspired its authors, particularly Harri Melin, Erkki Karvonen and Kaarle Nordenstreng, to put together a set of classic texts, which were translated into Hungarian and published as another volume of the project. Later discussions with Frank Webster led to prepare a more comprehensive reader, which will accompany the 2nd edition of his *Theories of the Information Society*.